



October 2023

## The Impossibility of Free Will and Ultimate Responsibility

Alexia Syrmos  
info@ubiquitypress.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/ijurca>

---

### Recommended Citation

Syrmos, Alexia (2023) "The Impossibility of Free Will and Ultimate Responsibility," *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*: Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 11.

DOI: 10.7710/2155-4838.1104

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/ijurca/vol6/iss2/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@CWU. It has been accepted for inclusion in *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities* by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@CWU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@cwu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@cwu.edu).

# The Impossibility of Free Will and Ultimate Responsibility

**Alexia Syrmos**  
*University of Washington*

Published online: 4 June 2014  
© Alexia Syrmos 2014

## Abstract

This paper concerns itself with the metaphysics of free will. To posit, as some philosophers do, that free will and determinism are incompatible is to provide a necessary condition for free will. Yet what should a sufficient condition look like? In other words, how might indeterminists provide a positive account of free will? In section 2 of this paper, I provide a few definitions and discuss an influential argument against compatibilism, namely the view that free will and determinism are compatible. This will help to identify some important criteria for theories of free will. Section 3 shows how abandoning determinism and adopting indeterminism is also problematic, and that we thus need to fill in the definition of free will. Section 4 presents the first part of Robert Kane's definition of free will, which goes along the lines of "we make choices based on our beliefs, priorities, etc." and section 5 offers Kane's account of Self-Forming Actions to explain how our beliefs and priorities are our own. The core of my objection will take place in section 6, where I show how the concept of a Self-Forming Action cannot make free will compatible with indeterminism in that the idea of a Self-Forming Action is incoherent.

## 1. Introduction

Some philosophers believe that free will and determinism are incompatible. To do so is to provide a necessary (but surely not sufficient) condition for free will. Yet naturally the question arises: what should a sufficient condition look like? In other words, how might indeterminists provide a positive account of free will? Robert Kane has proposed an answer: put roughly, we are free if at least some of our choices result from indeterministic processes in which the indeterminism is, in the right sense, ultimately up to us. In this paper, I provide an objection to Kane's solution.

The plan for this paper is as follows. In section 2, I will provide a few definitions and discuss an influential argument against compatibilism, namely the view that free will and determinism are compatible. This will help us to identify some important criteria for theories of free will. In section 3, I show how simply abandoning determinism and

adopting indeterminism is also problematic, and that we thus need to fill in the definition of free will. Section 4 presents the first part of Kane's definition of free will, which goes along the lines of "we make choices based on our beliefs, priorities, etc." and section 5 offers Kane's account of Self-Forming Actions to explain how our beliefs and priorities are our own. The core of my objection will take place in section 6, where I show how the concept of a Self-Forming Action cannot make free will compatible with indeterminism in that the idea of a Self-Forming Action is incoherent.

## 2. Definitions and the Argument Against Determinism

Whereas many might intuitively agree to statements of the sort "the future is open" and "I have free will," there exists much debate about such readily accepted declarations. For example, determinism posits that our present actions are necessary consequences of the past and the laws of nature and that since there is nothing that can be done to change either the past or the laws of nature, nothing can be done to change our present actions. Those who accept determinism and the existence of free will are referred to as "compatibilists". Those who accept determinism and reject the existence of free will are "hard determinists". Finally, people of the sort originally mentioned, who reject determinism (who are indeterminists) and accept free will are called "libertarians". Libertarians and hard determinists can also be suitably referred to as "incompatibilists" in that they maintain that free will and determinism are inherently contradictory and thus incompatible with one another.

A typical way for the incompatibilist to argue for their theory is to derive a contradiction from the existence of both free will and determinism. A notable incompatibilist objection to compatibilism is of the sort:

- (1) If we have free will, then we are the origins of our choices..
- (2) If determinism is true, then events outside of us (i.e. the initial conditions of the universe and the laws of nature) are the origins of our choices.
- (3) If our actions are caused by events outside of us (i.e. the initial conditions of the universe and the laws of nature), then we are not the origins of our choices.
- (4) If determinism is true, then we are not the origins of our choices.
- (5) If determinism is true, then we do not have free will.

It would appear as if an argument of this sort poses quite a problem for the compatibilist. The syllogism itself is valid, so if one were to want to debate the soundness of the argument, one ought to question the truth of the premises. The compatibilist obviously could not question (2); it is a basic definition of determinism. Nor could he or she argue with (3); it is virtually self-evident. Therefore, it behooves us to investigate premise (1).

There are two reasons that premise (1) is of interest to this paper, First and foremost, we notice that (1) fails to provide us with a *definition* of free will; it just provides a necessary condition for free will (namely, us being the origins of our choices). Consequently, even if the libertarian were to favor this argument, it falls short of constituting an argument for libertarianism. As such, the libertarian needs to fill in the definition of free will, something that Robert Kane attempts to do and that will be more thoroughly discussed in section 4 of this paper.

Secondly, although the argument falls short of providing us with a definition of free will, it does succeed in conveying something nonetheless interesting about free will: namely, that free will is connected in some way to us being the *origins of our choices*. Taking note of this now will prove fruitful later on as I use this point to object to Kane's definition of free will.

### 3. Abandoning Determinism

However, it is not enough to simply abandon determinism and adopt indeterminism. The libertarian needs provide a definition of free will (i.e. it is not enough to simply supply a necessary condition of free will; a sufficient one is needed). Suppose I live in an indeterministic world and decide to stop writing this paper and go for a run, where this decision is thus due to indeterministic and causal processes outside of my control. My decision to do so would be the first event in the causal chain of my performing this action (where subsequent events might be closing my laptop, getting my sneakers, going outside, etc.). However, if the definition of free will given above is correct, then I am the origin of my choices and nothing outside of my control has *caused* me to make this choice. Consequently, the link between my decision and my beginning to perform these movements is not causally determined, which is to say it is not necessitated by certain antecedent events in combination with the laws. Thus we encounter a problem regarding how it is that my decision could have had any impact whatsoever on my actions, and my performing a series of actions must subsequently be the consequence of chance. If it is the case that my actions are the consequence of either chance or luck, then it is hardly the case that I am the ultimate cause of my choices. Thus, simply positing indeterminism in the stead of determinism simply leads to additional problems regarding free will. It would appear as if we need a more in depth analysis of free will if we do not want to give up on its existence.

### 4. Kane's Theory of Free Will (Part 1)

Robert Kane attempts to provide us with this extra bit of analysis, defending the viability of libertarianism by accounting for free will in such a way that it becomes inseparable from indeterminism. Kane makes five points in trying to supply this account:

- (1) We can cause indeterministic events. That is to say that when we intend to do something with the knowledge that this action will probably result in a consequent, then we are responsible for this consequent if it happens (Kane 293-294)

For example, let us say that I am going to drop a glass of milk with the intention that the glass breaks. Let us now say that I accomplish this goal. Kane argues that we would say that I am responsible for having shattered the glass even though whether or not it would shatter was indeterministic. As the indeterminism arises from matters of fact about the glass itself, there is thus a sense that my action was both up to me in a very important sense *and* up to chance (Kane 294).

- (2) Our brains are parallel processors (Kane 294)

This is to say that we are capable of having two processes going on in our head at the same time, such as wanting two things at once. The example given by Kane is that of a businesswoman, running late for a meeting when she sees someone being assaulted. Here, her brain is working as a parallel processor in that she is experiencing two simultaneous and conflicting desires (the desire to make her meeting and the desire to stop the assault) at the same time.

- (3) In special deliberative processes, your mental processes are “pushing in opposite directions” (Kane 294-295).

This is simply to say that one would be willing to do either thing in these sorts of deliberative processes (e.g. either get to the meeting on time or stop the assault).

- (4) It is ultimately indeterministic which option in the deliberative process wins out (Kane 295).

This is an interesting point that takes us back to the example of my dropping a glass of milk. In that case, the indeterminism of my action arose from facts about the glass itself. In the example of the businesswoman, the indeterminism arises from her willingness to do either thing.

- (5) Probability is apportioned to the relative strength of will (Kane 295-296).

In the case of the business woman, the probability that she will make it to her meeting on time and let the assault take place has to do with which decision lies in accordance with her will. If her will to make it to the meeting in a timely manner is stronger than that of her will to help the victim, it is much more probable that she will choose that route.

Therefore, whichever choice the businesswoman makes, she has caused it as a part of her was willing it; the source of the indeterminism comes from the different features of her will. One ought to think of the effort—where the “effort” is our wills struggling against one another—and the indeterminism of the choice as fused. Subsequently, it would not appear to be unreasonable for Kane to conclude that free will is compatible with indeterminism, having provided us with a sufficient condition for possessing free will.

## 5. Kane’s Theory of Free Will (Part 2)

Kane's explanation of what it is to make a choice seems to amount to “we make choices based on our beliefs, priorities, etc.” These reasons—that is to say these beliefs and priorities—result in what Kane calls the “effort”. So we end up in a situation where Kane has claimed that our choices arise from our reasons. To continue using the example of the businesswoman, an essential question to ask would then be: from where did her reasons arise? *Why* did she have the desires, dispositions, etc? Was *that* up to her? We find ourselves in nearly the exact same situation we were when Kane began his argument; we are still debating whether or not the causes of our choices are determined or undetermined. It would appear as if Kane’s argument has done little to convince us of free will’s compatibility with indeterminism.

However, Kane recognizes this problem in his argument and responds to it appropriately with a description of what he calls “Self-Forming Actions” (SFAs). SFAs are moments of indecision, as mentioned above, in which our wills are in conflict with each other and we use reasoning to come to a decision (Kane 296). The SFAs are the sources of our beliefs and priorities. For example, let us say that I always give money to charity. This sort of action is commendable in the sense that it is something that I have cultivated; I am responsible for forming this kind of character. For at some point or another, my mind was working as a parallel processor, having two desires going on in my head at the same time; namely, my want to give to charity versus my want to keep my money (Point 2). Additionally, when I was making this decision, I was willing to do either thing (Points 3 and 4). Ultimately, I decided to give to charity, for my desire to give to charity and be a charitable person was greater than my wanting to keep my money for myself (Point 5).

Kane posits that this sort of “ultimate responsibility” for my actions (even once they are habituated and can be referred to as determined<sup>1</sup>) arises from the moment in which I encountered an SFA; in other words, SFAs are necessary for having ultimate responsibility over one’s actions. However, if you are a compatibilist, Kane claims that

---

<sup>1</sup> For Kane, it is not necessary that every decision we make is undetermined but only that decisions regarding SFAs are.

you would be faced with an infinite regress that strips you of ultimate responsibility. In that all of your actions and reasoning behind them are necessarily determined, there is a sense that neither your dispositions nor your choices were ever really “up to you” and you consequently do not bear responsibility for your actions. Thus, SFAs operate as indeterministic regress-stoppers that are necessary for ultimate responsibility; SFAs require a more robust sense of choice than compatibilism allows for in that it is necessary that my decision is not determined. Consequently, if I never really made the sort of choice that Kane talks about, then there is no ultimate responsibility for my actions. Obviously it is problematic for us to accept that there is no sort of ultimate responsibility for our actions (our entire legal system would fall apart), so it would behoove us to accept the existence of SFAs. Consequently, Kane rejects the compatibilist view of free will, as there must be instances in which we make undetermined choices.

## 6. Objection to Kane’s Theory

I will now argue that Kane’s descriptions of free will and SFAs do not adequately answer the question of how we are responsible for our actions (that is to say, how we bear ultimate responsibility). A problem seems to arise when we consider someone deliberating for the first time. For the sake of this thought experiment sounding more reasonable to us, let us say that this person is a child. The child has not yet cultivated her own disposition but has instead just been “given” dispositions by her surroundings (for instance, her parents, teachers, books she might have been read, etc. are all currently responsible for her disposition). She is not yet ultimately responsible for her actions. However, Kane would say that after this SFA, she will bear ultimate responsibility. So after this first deliberation, in which her mind is working as a parallel processor and pushing in different directions (Points 2 and 3), she will become responsible for her choices in that she has succeeded in cultivating her own disposition (or at least a part of it). However, if she is not currently responsible for her dispositions, is she responsible for her reasoning? I would say no. Given the kinds of beings that we are, our dispositions strongly affect the kinds of reasoning we do, the kinds of conclusions that we draw and the decisions that we subsequently make. In other words, our reasoning results from our dispositions. Yet if the child in question has been given her dispositions by external factors, she has also been given her reasoning. Thus, the “strength of her will” (Point 5) that ultimately determines the probability of her decision has been supplied to her and the decision was not “up to her” in the significant sort of way that Kane requires. It would appear as if there is no way to escape her reasoning being governed by external factors.

This is an objection to which I cannot find a solution. I have focused on the very first SFA because insofar as they are *necessary* for ultimate responsibility, it follows that if we cannot even have our first SFA, then we fail to have any sort of ultimate responsibility. Having made the point that we do not have responsibility for our

dispositions prior to our first SFA, it follows that we lack responsibility for our reasoning while deliberating over the SFA. It is thus impossible for that SFA to actually be an SFA in that we are not responsible for its outcome (i.e. the decision that we make) and the very idea of an SFA proves to be incoherent. As such, it would appear as if we do not have ultimate responsibility for our actions or, if we do, it cannot be by reference to Kane's SFA theory.

## 7. Conclusion

I have presented the varying stances regarding free will and the determined or undetermined nature of our world—compatibilism and incompatibilism (more specifically, libertarianism and hard determinism). The incompatibilist traditionally tries to argue against compatibilism by showing how determinism and free will are incompatible with one another. Unfortunately for the libertarian, all this argument succeeds in doing is showing that free will is incompatible with both a determined and an undetermined universe. However, Robert Kane gives an account of free will in such a way that free will manages to exist in an indeterministic world. Yet, as is the case in his account, if our choices arise from our reasons, then from where do our reasons arise? According to Kane, our reasons emerge from Self Forming Actions, in which the decisions we make form our characters and allow us to bear ultimate responsibility for our actions. However, in the way I have problematized his theory, it would appear that there is no way for one's reasoning to not be governed by external sources. Thus, we are left with a conclusion that would intuitively trouble most. I have already discussed that we are not responsible for the kind of individuals we are; that is determined by external factors. Since our actions arise from the kind of person that we are and ultimate responsibility over our actions entails being responsible for the kind of person we are, then it would appear as if we are not ultimately responsible for our actions. Therefore, Kane's account fails to provide a sufficient condition for the possession of free will.

## Work Cited

Kane, R. (2005) "Incompatibilism." In Sider, T., Hawthorne, J. and Zimmerman, D. (eds.) *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.